

Beacons

By Dan Mauro

Stage Reading, Greater Carbondale Chamber of Commerce Gallery, Carbondale, PA, July 27, 2019, 1-4 P.M.

*The Other Side of the Popsicle Stick**

By S. Robert Powell

On December 13, 1900, Thomas Marshall, James Ducat, and Donald MacArthur, who manned the Flannan Isles Lighthouse near the highest point on Eilean Mòr, one of the Flannan Isles in the Outer Hebrides off the west coast of Scotland, mysteriously disappeared. Dan Mauro's play, *Beacons*, which is set in the Flannan Isles in 2000, is an inquiry into their disappearance.

A stage reading of the play, in eleven scenes (Scenes 1, 3, 5, 7, and 9 take place at the Police Station on December 14th, afternoon; Scenes 2, 4, 6, and 8, Lighthouse, December 13th, night; Scene 10, Lighthouse, December 14th, early morning; Scene 11, Police Station, January 9th, afternoon) was presented/performed before a live audience in the Greater Carbondale Chamber of Commerce Gallery on Saturday, July 27, 2019, with the following cast: Detective Dougal (Adam Nosak); Holland Brant (Megan Esty), Dutch (Julie Esty), Ewan (James Pennington), The Man (Karl Barbee). Wendy Belaski was charged with reading the stage directions, and did so, clearly and unobtrusively. The author, Dan Mauro, was present at the reading.

The ostensible intent of the play is to learn what happened to Marshall, Ducat, and MacArthur. At the end of the performance, which was enthusiastically received by the audience in the Chamber Gallery on July 27th, however, the spectator suddenly realizes that the intent of the play is not to present answers, but rather to portray the agenda-ridden and egocentric path, which Mauro brilliantly presents in *Beacons*, down which these five characters--and by extension, all of us--must travel as we strive to understand and to make sense out of the world around us.

From the very beginning of the play and throughout the play, the process of knowing is always stage center. Here is the *Prologue* to the play, which was beautifully read/performed, in a straightforward manner and with a compelling youthful sincerity, by Megan Esty in the role of Holland in this performance:

"When I was a girl my mom used to tell me stories of where she was from. Only because I would ask a lot. But the stories were never true. So I'd say, "Please tell me about your home!" And she'd smile and say something sappy like, "Looking into your beautiful eyes. That is where I feel

at home.” But that’s not the answer I wanted so I would push and push. Eventually she’d give me something. For the longest time she told me she was from the ocean. That she was born in a reef. I’d ask for the actual answer. One time she said, “I can’t tell you about my hometown because everyone there is secretly an undercover spy. Oops! Oh no, I let it slip.” Then I asked if she was a spy. Sometimes she was a bird who lost her wings or an alien in disguise. And every time she would wink and say, “Don’t tell your father.” As I got older I started to get actual facts, but not why she left or why she never wanted to go back. I learned she met my father studying abroad, or well studying here. I would ask and ask because I needed to know a world existed beyond Baltimore. Which nothing against Baltimore, but how can you look out on a dock and not wonder what is across it? I’d press my dad for information, but he’d always say “If someone isn’t ready to tell you something that’s their business.” So it always came down to me to piece it together.”

And piecing it all together is not an easy or a straightforward process, as Holland learns in the first five lines of the play, when she interacts with Dougal and his confrontational /condescending /“I’m-right-and-you’re-wrong” /focus-on-me /listen-to-my-problems attitude. Here are the first five lines of the play:

Dougal	I don’t mind if you smoke.
Holland	Thank you, but I don’t smoke.
Dougal	I do and I was hoping you would say the same to me. But it’s fine. I won’t smoke.
Holland	You can. I don’t mind.
Dougal	No, no. It’s fine. Really it’s fine. Holland Brant, right?

That same confrontational/self-serving attitude permeates Scenes 1-6 of the play, in which we learn a lot about Dougal and Dutch and Holland and Ewan as they interact with each other--and virtually nothing about what really happened to the three missing lighthouse keepers. Those interactions resulted in superb readings/performances by Dougal and Dutch and Holland and Ewan. Most interestingly, those four characters can easily be divided into two primary personality types: Dougal and Dutch are clearly Alpha types; Holland and Ewan, Beta types.

Scene 4, between Ewan and Holland is a very amusing biographical ramble, performed with great style and polish, by Megan Esty, as Holland Brant (an earnest and tolerant journalist who is a ghost stalker who collects ant farms), and James Pennington, as Ewan (an ex-boxing grammar enthusiast who is also Scottish and a Buddhist). It is in this scene that Holland observes: “We don’t have to agree on the truth for it to exist.”--surely one of those million-dollar lines in the theater that take on a life of their own and stay with you long after the final curtain has come down.

Scene 5, performed in full-blooded Alpha-style and with intensity, passion, and thrust by Adam Nosak as Dougal and Julie Esty as Dutch, was thrilling to behold. Therein, we read:

DOUGAL: Don't do my job for me. Maybe your job isn't so great, but I-

DUTCH: Pardon you again.

DOUGAL: Moving forward.

DUTCH: No, we are not moving forward. We are staying right where we are. Don't you look down on me because I work with my hands. This wasn't the back up. This wasn't because my family was never well off. And yeah we weren't, but I got a damn good job. I like to understand why every piece in a machine matters. I like that I have to see a doctor regularly because I'm on my knees so much for my job. And I like that when I do my job right people don't get hurt. It seems you only show up after someone gets hurt. Who exactly are you saving?

DOUGAL: I'm going to take a step back and address a couple things. First, I'm sorry I belittled your work. Second, I'm here so no one else gets hurt. Finally, I recommend you watch yourself or do you forget why you're here? I'm not ruling anything or *anyone* out. I'm trying to not go into this with any bias. Answer my questions truthfully and this won't have to go down a road I'd rather not travel. Please.

A fully staged presentation of that scene between Dougal and Dutch, with its confrontational/verbal jousting, would be wonderful to see. As Dutch and Dougal, in this performance, hacked away at each other, armed with incisive verbal thrusts created by Dan Mauro, who is a master at creating fast-paced razor-edged dialogue, we thought immediately of unforgettable performances of plays by Edward Albee, in particular the spine-tingling performances/confrontations between Richard Burton and Liz Taylor in Edward Albee's immortal *Who's Afraid of Virginia Wolff?*

In Scene 7, Dougal, having put down all humans in his path, now argues with himself. To do so, he declares one chair to be "supernatural" and another chair to be "natural" and then explores options, using sticky notes (yellow for theory, red for roadblocks, green for opportunities) to clarify, in his own mind, the situation at hand. Having considered multiple options, Dougal, the know-it-all, always-in-control Alpha male, then sits down in the supernatural chair and stares at the natural chair (covered in sticky notes). At that moment, Dougal, consumed by self-doubt ("I might not be right for this case.") and searching for stability, erases the slate of his life and goes back to the starting gate ("I'm tired. I'm awake...") in an effort to get a hold of himself and his life and to move forward. It's one of the great moments in *Beacons* and in this reading was performed by Adam Nosak with electrifying intensity and strength. Here is that wonderful moment in the play:

"Opportunity . . . I'm tired. I'm awake, I mean, but it's getting tough to keep at it. Roadblock: I might not be right for this case. Roadblock: I might not be right for any case. Roadblock: have I figured anything out? In the grander sense, I guess. That might be a bit much. Roadblock: I miss playing with my brother, just being a kid in general I suppose. I miss when the biggest problem in my life was getting my new shoes muddy. I miss having impossible questions being solved by checking the other side of the popsicle stick for the answer to the riddle. Opportunity: I guess I'm doing alright. Roadblock: what does "alright" even mean? Opportunity: I have people relying on

me. Not just here, but . . . oh fuck. I didn't mail the check for his physical therapy. I know I need to stay on top of it and I . . . I have to get something right. Opportunity: might as well start now."

Scene 8 is a symphonic presentation of the egocentric and self-serving main theme of the play, which is expressed by Holland and Dutch and Ewan in many ways:

Holland, in a confrontation with Dutch:" You're just afraid that what I believe in contradicts what you believe in. Because if I'm right you can't be. And if that's the case what do you even have. What safety do you have to hold onto anything? Your work, your dog, your husband. All in question if someone is different that's dangerous."

Dutch: "That's right. We don't know. We don't know any of this. There is so much of this that no one knows or will ever know. And at this point what difference does it make? Even if we did solve it, what difference would that make? How would that benefit us now?"

Ewan: "I mean, who cares how it happened? Maybe it's better not to have one answer? Kind of like art. People love art because they can choose the explanation. What it means to them and all that. So maybe scary stories are really just art when you get down to it? Oh damn, I like that. I really like that, I never thought that before. That was right off the top of my [head], oh damn that was good."

In Scene 9, Dougal and Dutch indulge in fact checking: "This is the gun that was fired?" "Yes". In Scene 10, an enigmatic Man, read with a cold-blooded intensity by Karl Barbee, makes an appearance and not only initiates a discourse on truth ("Maybe the truth is our mutual understanding? We enjoy lies.") but also reveals the presence of the gun with which Ewan was shot in the chest. Barbee's commanding presence and forceful performance in this scene appropriately reinforced, as the inquiry was moving rapidly to a conclusion, the seriousness of the inquiry. Holland, who has a limited appetite for empirical reality, remarks: "Let's keep talking about stories and jokes and names and truth and all that philosophical stuff."

Scene 11, which takes place on January 9 under the direction of Dougal, almost a month after the main action of the play on December 13-14, is a tranquil coda in which Dougal and Ewan reflect on the events of December 13-14 and prepare for the future. Scene 11 ends with Ewan mentioning that he is taking up archery ("We'll, just watching right now cause of the arm. But it is kinda funny so maybe it is a joke?") To which Dougal replies: Well, best of luck. And hey, I know it gets rough with the whole... you know. But just keep moving." Ewan: "All I can do, right?" Dougal: "Yes, I suppose so."

Beacons then concludes with an *Epilogue*, the text of which is an intellectual and emotional tour de force created by Dan Mauro. This remarkable text is here delivered by a world-weary and wiser Holland than we met in the *Prologue*. The subject of the *Epilogue*, like that of the

Prologue and that of the play itself, is the process of knowing. Megan Esty's relaxed, compassionate and heartfelt reading of the *Epilogue* in this performance was unforgettable. Here is that *Epilogue*:

"When I was a girl I'd tell my mom stories of all the places I would go. How I would travel the world and learn everything I could. That I would get away from home and see things that mattered. She always encouraged me to do so, yet I saw the sadness in her eyes when I would say those things. Growing up it felt like she was lying to me. That she never wanted me to leave. That she was afraid of the world and didn't want me to have the opportunity to explore it. Fear I would be hurt. Now I think she really did see home in my eyes and didn't want to lose that. But she did let me go and now I think I know what the look in her eyes meant. Letting people go is, but kind of isn't your choice. They can make that choice to physically move away, but you still have to learn to be okay with it. I wish I didn't understand that now. I don't know where my mom was actually from. I don't know what happened to her. I don't know what happened to those lighthouse keepers or even that man. Or if they're one in the same. But here's what I got. I know that I'll never actually know what happened. I know my mom loved me. I know I miss my mom. I know that's okay. I'm pretty sure I'm going to be okay. I know that pain doesn't fully go away. I know that it gets small enough that you can carry it in your pocket so it's always with you. I know that it doesn't define you. And I know . . . I know, I'm sorry I'm really tired. I know I need to get some sleep so I'm going to go do that."

The conclusion of *Beacons* is reminiscent of *Huis Clos* of Jean-Paul Sartre, in which four characters--a Valet, Garcin, Estelle, and Inez--are condemned to spend eternity in a Second Empire drawing room, with a massive bronze ornament on the mantelpiece, from which there is no exit. Here are the final lines of that play:

Inez: "Dead! Dead! Dead! Knives, poison, ropes—useless. It has happened already, do you understand? Once and for all. So here we are, forever."

Estelle: Forever. My God, how funny! Forever.

Garcin: Forever, and ever, and ever." (A long silence.) "Well, well, let's get on with it."

Beacons is a probing and insightful twentieth-first century play that chronicles the search for answers by a team of investigators into the mysterious disappearance of three lighthouse keepers on one of the Flannan Isles in the Outer Hebrides off the west coast of Scotland on December 13, 1900. In that search for answers, the inquisitors unknowingly and unconsciously focus more energy on themselves and their personal needs and desires and their worlds than they do on the unsolved question that has brought them together. As we read and think about Mauro's remarkable play and about the contemporary world, we must therefore ask ourselves two questions: (1) By what process do we know what we know, and (2) Have we become Dutch and Holland and Dougal and Ewan and The Man?

* * * * *

* See *Beacons*, Scene 7

This reading/performance of *Beacons* was hosted by the Greater Carbondale Chamber of Commerce Gallery, Ruthanne Jones, Gallery Director. Following the reading, the cast and author were enthusiastically applauded by one and all. A bountiful dessert reception, hosted by family and friends of the author and actors and by the Chamber Gallery, was then presented/served in the Greater Carbondale Chamber of Commerce Gallery.